

Preparations for the forthcoming bicentenary celebrations of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the Birth of the Báb (II)

As the momentous occasion of the first of the two-hundred-year anniversaries of the Births of the Twin Manifestations of God draws closer, the International Teaching Centre has been overjoyed by the reports received from every continent that demonstrate how the friends have intensified their efforts to raise vibrant communities—in rural settings and urban centres—in a “concerted effort to convey a sense of what it means for humanity that these two Luminaries rose successively above the horizon of the world”.¹ In preparation for the bicentenary celebrations and in their desire to see a flourishing of activity at the local level, the believers are reaching out to the widest possible circle of people, engaging in conversations about the Person and Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, and inviting them to experience how worship and meaningful service can be interwoven through the Faith's community-building efforts.

In its 2017 Ridván message, the Universal House of Justice states that “this year presents the single greatest worldwide opportunity there has ever been for connecting hearts to Bahá'u'lláh”. It further notes that no believer should be deprived of this joyous endeavour, urging the Bahá'í world to be “mindful of this precious chance and alert to the possibilities that exist in every space for acquainting others” with the life of the Blessed Beauty and His sublime mission. The House of Justice also conveyed, in a recent letter dated 2 May 2017 written on its behalf to all National Spiritual Assemblies, that “the countless events that will occur in neighbourhoods and villages, within households and communities, attracting all comers, will form part of a single, global coming together of peoples to honour a Manifestation of God, the Unifier of the human race.”

The stories in this edition of *Reflections on Growth* highlight the ways in which individuals, communities, and institutions, especially Local Spiritual Assemblies, are preparing for the celebrations of the Twin Holy Birthdays in October 2017:

- by involving every Bahá'í individual and family in the preparations and encouraging them to seek out and teach all with whom they share a connection;
- by visiting and conversing with all the participants in the core activities, particularly those from the wider society and their families, to help nurture their connection to the Faith and to invite them to extend the conversation about the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to a growing number of people;
- by reaching out to all the households and inhabitants of a locality to participate in the community-building activities;
- by strengthening the devotional character of the community through multiplying gatherings for prayer, where discussions on spiritual themes also take place;
- by learning to organize local Holy Day observances that welcome the participation of the greatest possible number of people;
- by deepening friendships with local leaders and bringing to their attention the significance of the occasions; and
- by using creative means, including visual arts, songs, and literature, to convey the significance of the appearance of the Blessed Beauty and His Revelation.

AFRICA

Central African Republic

In the Plateaux neighbourhood of the **Bas Oubangui** cluster, the friends have been preparing for the celebrations of the Twin Anniversaries by focusing on introducing the Person of Bahá'u'lláh to the local population while multiplying the activities. A friend helping with the coordination explained:

We felt it was useful to do a study of our neighbourhood. We estimated that the Plateaux neighbourhood has a total population of 2,000—about 600 children, 300 junior youth, 300 youth, and 800 adults. A neighbourhood chief and 6 key figures administer and exercise state authority. Of the adults, 60% are farmers or market gardeners, 20% are civil servants, and 20% are merchants. On average, each household includes about 5 individuals, adding up to about 400 families. There are 45 Bahá'ís in the neighbourhood. Based on this information, we designed strategies to promote the participation of a large number of people from the neighbourhood in the celebrations and established the following activities for the two remaining cycles until October 2017:

- **Focus on families:** We identified about 80 friends of the Faith who are already engaged in the community-building activities and could join us in inviting others to the significant Festivals, starting with their own families. We also identified that among the 400 households in the neighbourhood, about 40 are already familiar with the Person of Bahá'u'lláh. To widen the circle of friends participating in the celebrations, we divided the neighbourhood into groups, each consisting of 3 households that already know about the Faith and 5 others not yet familiar with the Name of Bahá'u'lláh. The 3 families would then reach out to the 5 other families and invite them to the celebrations. With this approach, it is envisioned that a large percentage of the population in the neighbourhood will participate in the celebrations of the Twin Birthdays.
- **Holding regular community meetings:** Meetings are held once a week to examine progress in the community and offer support to those families initiating their first conversations with the 5 families in their neighbourhood.
- **Meetings with community leaders:** A team has met with the neighbourhood chief and other key figures in the community to present them with an invitation to the first of the two bicentenary celebrations. After receiving the invitation, the chief said, “If I am invited to the celebration six months in advance, I can understand that this is a special occasion.”

Congo Republic

In the **Pointe-Noire** cluster, a reflection meeting was organized to consult on the bicentenary celebration of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh. The friends drew up a calendar with meetings each month leading up to the Twin Holy Days in October 2017, with the aim to mobilize as large a group of people as possible to attend the events. During this initial meeting, an initiative called “A Gift for Bahá'u'lláh” was launched. A community member explained:

The aim of the initiative is to raise the awareness of and mobilize each Bahá'í in carrying out activities in their neighbourhood to introduce the Person of Bahá'u'lláh

to parents, neighbours, friends, and acquaintances. We designed a brochure that presents a short story on the life of the Blessed Beauty and describes the various community-building activities. In the brochure, a practical approach is suggested for the friends to get involved in various social spaces in a neighbourhood and to mention the Name of Bahá'u'lláh. We realized that mentioning the Name of Bahá'u'lláh is sparking excitement and interest, which is something we had not expected.

Another gift to Bahá'u'lláh came from the youth choir of the Bahá'ís of Pointe-Noire, which prepared a musical album called “The Bicentenary”. The songs mention the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and describe His mission. The members of the choir see the album as “a tool to mobilize our peers and the entire community to offer a gift to Bahá'u'lláh”.

Democratic Republic of Congo

The friends across three neighbourhoods in **Kinshasa** have made every effort to multiply the number of activities and seize every opportunity to raise awareness of the coming Twin Holy Days, as illustrated below.

In our neighbourhood of Buadi, we made a list of friends currently engaged in the core activities. We found it helpful to think in terms of cycles, and we set a goal to triple the number of core activities within one cycle and then to build on that for the next cycle, leading up to the first of the Twin Anniversaries.

After making these plans, we visited home after home and spoke with the parents of the children and junior youth participating in the community's educational activities, involving friends of the Faith who take part in devotional meetings and study circles.

Over 350 friends from the three neighbourhoods participated in the Naw-Rúz celebration this year, of which 200 were from the wider community. This whole process has led to an overall increase in the number of activities.

Mali

The efforts of the believers in **Mali** to prepare for the two-hundred-year anniversary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh were brought into sharp focus at its recent National Convention. The delegates reported on the plans of their respective communities, which are drawing on aspects of the local arts and culture to befittingly celebrate this significant Festival. Below are some recollections from the National Convention consultations.

In the **Tabakoro** cluster, the youth are preparing dramatic presentations on various themes of the Faith and creating banners and special invitations for local authorities. In one planning meeting, all the significant popular folklores of the region were reviewed, and a decision was made to invite a few local folklore groups. A distinguished traditional female singer is composing songs in honour of Bahá'u'lláh for the celebration of the Twin Anniversaries in 2017. All her children participate in Bahá'í children's classes, and the history of her family in relation to the Faith is remarkable. Over twenty years ago, her husband had a dream foretelling that he would encounter the Bahá'í Faith. In the dream, a stranger told him, while pointing in a certain direction, “Go there, God is calling you.” So he walked in that direction and soon found an old figure sitting on a large, pure-white pile of sand. He had a cigarette in his hand, and the elderly figure told him, “Throw away what is in your

hand before approaching.” He turned away to drop his cigarette. As he turned back to identify this elderly figure, he could no longer see him—he had disappeared. Since then, he always wondered why this person in his dream had indicated to him this particular direction which, according to him, was neither to the East nor to the North. It was when he saw the Bahá’ís saying their obligatory prayers that he understood everything! They prayed in the same direction as was pointed to him in his dream two decades earlier. It was towards the Qiblah!

In the **Bougouni** cluster, similar artistic preparations are under way with the involvement of local folklore groups and large celebrations in the public square. There is electricity in the air. The youth are planning something exceptional.

In Blengoi, a village in the **Fana** cluster, the proceeds from the harvest of a community garden plot will be used to finance the expenses of the celebration.

In **Bamako**, the capital of Mali, the Local Spiritual Assembly is closely collaborating with the External Affairs Committee of the National Spiritual Assembly to ensure success for the bicentenary celebrations. The friends are preparing a special package to present to the authorities, from the national to the municipal levels, and arranging for large media coverage with the aim to convey the significance of the Twin Luminaries in the life of humanity. They want to ensure that the media community is equipped to cover the events surrounding the celebrations and is knowledgeable of the Persons of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh. Artistic presentations featuring storytelling, drama, singing, poetry, dancing, and instrumental music will be highlighted on each of the upcoming Twin Holy Days.

South Africa

The Local Spiritual Assembly of **Cape Town** consulted on the nature and spirit of the festivities surrounding the forthcoming bicentenary celebrations in October 2017 that would befit the significance of the occasions. The friends decided to organize a range of events and activities. Using the arts and audiovisual materials, they will prepare a presentation about the history of the Bahá’í Faith and the history of the community in South Africa, in particular highlighting the sacrifices that have been made in the path of its establishment. An artistic display will provide information about the core activities that are part of the community-building process in the **Western Cape** region and around the world. One of the friends further explained:

As we gain experience in our efforts to achieve the goals of the Five Year Plan, we will continue to learn about receptive populations and how we can engage with them in our preparations for the two-hundred-year anniversaries of the Twin Birthdays. Using traditional media, such as storytelling through shadow puppetry, we will tell the story of the lives of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh to inspire and uplift those who may as yet be unfamiliar with Their Names.

Zambia

The cluster agencies and local institutions in the **Southern and Western Provinces** have been using various creative ways, in stronger clusters and those nearby, to prepare for the first of the two-hundred-year anniversaries of the Births of the Twin Luminaries. In the **Sinazongwe** cluster, the Local Spiritual Assembly is working with the cluster coordinators for all three educational imperatives to visit local chiefs in the region. In addition, a team of youth has been formed to convey to the community the significance of the bicentenary celebrations and to inspire the friends in their preparations.

In the **Batoka** cluster, the friends decided that they would share information about the forthcoming Twin Holy Days with friends of the Faith and every new person met during the expansion phase to help create a common vision among all engaged in the community-building process. A community member shared the following:

The people we have met have expressed their desire to be a part of the celebrations. They have brought their family members to join the children's classes and junior youth groups, and they themselves are ready to study the institute courses. They have encouraged their youth to participate in study circles as well. As we prepare for the first of these two auspicious events, we have started creating songs using the institute books, particularly Book 1 and Book 4.

One area that has been given special attention is the strengthening of the devotional character of the family and the relationships established with the parents of the young souls participating in children's classes and junior youth groups. The following account from the **Northwestern Province** describes how the friends envision enhancing family devotions.

According to the Lunda culture, a family is composed of fathers, mothers, children, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, grandparents, and cousins. In many cases, the members of this extended family come together in times of celebration and support one another during challenges. Ten or so families usually make up a village, of which most are related.

Some Local Spiritual Assemblies, in collaboration with the cluster agencies, decided to organize many family devotional gatherings, which naturally include the extended family. It was felt that such gatherings could become a space to reflect and consult on the spiritual and material well-being of the community. The Local Assemblies also decided to strengthen the communal devotional meetings and use these gatherings as an opportunity to connect hearts with the Person of Bahá'u'lláh in preparation of the two-hundred-year anniversary of His Birth.

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THE AMERICAS

Colombia

During a series of institutional meetings in **Colombia**, consultations centred on how the bicentenary celebrations can be used as special opportunities to reach out to the widest possible cross section of society. The following account illustrates how these gatherings gave an impulse to actions at the local level with the involvement of Local Spiritual Assemblies.

During the institutional meeting, we reflected on what the Universal House of Justice was asking of us in the 18 May 2016 letter. We decided to make a list of all those with whom we share a connection, and among them, those with whom we could initiate a conversation about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and whom we could invite to join in the community-building activities. The exercise of making a list gave us a glimpse of how a small group—of, let's say, some 20 to 30 people—has the potential to invite a few thousand to the celebrations. After these meetings, each Regional Bahá'í Council made plans to visit many Local Assemblies in their respective regions to help more and more friends prepare for the celebrations. We are seeing that Assemblies and other agencies are, through a similar process,

helping local believers to actively think about and make concrete plans to invite the largest number of people possible.

In the Villa Rica community in the **Norte del Cauca** cluster, the believers, with the support of their Local Spiritual Assembly, saw the importance of universal participation at the Nineteen Day Feast, the space in which the whole community could reflect on steps each one could take leading up to the bicentenaries. In the Alegrías community, the Local Assembly formed committees to look after different aspects of the preparation and organization of the celebrations. One friend shared the following:

Each of the committees is helping to involve many friends in the preparation, drawing on all the talents and skills in the community. One committee has visited every home to share the 18 May 2016 letter and consult on the preparations leading up to the bicentenary celebrations. These efforts have inspired growing numbers of friends to participate in the community-building endeavours. It is wonderful to see that attendance at the Nineteen Day Feast and at Holy Days has more than doubled; for the latter growing from around 20 to 50 friends.

El Salvador

The friends serving on the cluster agencies and Local Spiritual Assemblies in **El Salvador** have set concrete goals to invite a wide circle of people to engage in the community-building process and to attend the celebrations of the two-hundred-year anniversaries of the Births of the Twin Manifestations. Below are excerpts from reports describing how their preparations unfolded.

In the **Metropolitana** cluster, the Local Spiritual Assembly seized the occasion of Riḍván to engage many in speaking about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh. It appointed three teams to help with planning the celebrations for the First, Ninth, and Twelfth Days of Riḍván, and it encouraged the friends to talk with their neighbours, friends, and others about Bahá'u'lláh and the significance of His Declaration during this Festival and to invite them to the celebrations. The Riḍván celebrations also provided opportunities to invite friends to participate in acts of service and devotional meetings in each sector.

The Area Teaching Committee of the **Occidente Norte** cluster organized a teaching conference to mobilize the friends to explore ways of having 160 souls in two cycles engaged in ongoing conversations about Bahá'u'lláh. The Area Teaching Committee in the **Occidente Sur** cluster similarly aimed to reach in two cycles 250 souls who will get to know Bahá'u'lláh and can be part of the celebrations.

The Local Spiritual Assembly of Sonsonate held gatherings for the community on a monthly basis to consult about the importance of the celebrations and of individual plans to reach friends, families, and participants of the core activities. Every Friday, the friends deepen on the life of the Manifestation and then visit others to share stories about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and inspire them to support the preparations for the bicentenary celebrations.

Mexico

In the **Querétaro** cluster, the friends found creative ways to introduce the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Message to their friends and acquaintances in the local community. Below is one such example.

In January, our Corregidora community organized a gathering called “Falling in love with Bahá'u'lláh” consisting of devotions, stories from the life of Bahá'u'lláh, and video presentations. Friends of varying ages shared stories about events in His life that occurred at a time when they were of a similar age to Bahá'u'lláh. They presented the story in the following manner: “I am *x* years old, and when Bahá'u'lláh was this age....” The anecdotes were presented in creative ways and were very dignified. The video presentations were from six or seven youth who recorded a one-minute video each sharing about their love for Bahá'u'lláh. The recordings were filled with emotion and permeated the hearts of all those who watched.

Puerto Rico

The friends in **Puerto Rico** have stepped up their efforts to initiate meaningful conversations and teach the Faith and thereby increase the circle of friends engaged in community-building activities and invite as many as possible to the bicentenary celebrations. One of the friends serving on an institution shared:

There is a teaching team that is continuously building a list of people they want to share a prayer with, teach the Faith to, or invite to a social gathering. The members of the team are ready to initiate a meaningful conversation with whoever crosses their path and are creating bonds of friendship and extending invitations to the bicentenary celebrations. They have already opened a study circle and are planning to open more.

With great enthusiasm and in anticipation of welcoming many, one of the friends thought of sending a letter to the mayor of her community to ask whether the town square could be used for the Twin Holy Birthdays.

In another community, where there are no Bahá'í youth, the friends are planning to approach the staff and students at the local university that is dedicated to the arts to speak about the Faith and offer an artistic presentation on the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. This way, many youth will be contacted, whose friends may also want to know more and become involved.

United States

Two Auxiliary Board members serving the state of **Washington** brought together their 35 assistants who are serving in 6 clusters with programmes of growth. In order to help communities at the local level to focus and prepare for the bicentenary celebrations, several of the assistants made plans to arrange study sessions for the 18 May 2016 message written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice and then shared the outcomes of these gatherings with the Auxiliary Board members. One assistant worked with a Local Spiritual Assembly to organize 4 study gatherings in different parts of the community where celebrations could be planned. A three-day teaching seminar was also organized during which the friends reviewed relevant sections of Book 2, Book 4, and Book 6 in the morning and went out to make new contacts or go for home visits in the afternoon.

A similar teaching effort was carried out in the **Triangle** cluster in North Carolina, and an Auxiliary Board member noted that some of the conversations about the life of Bahá'u'lláh were years in the making with long-term associates, while others were chance encounters in public spaces. In this way, the friends felt better prepared to seize the opportunities of this special period, whether it is an exchange of one minute, thirty minutes, or one hour that can connect hearts to the Blessed Beauty.

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ASIA

Hong Kong

In light of the upcoming bicentenary celebrations, the friends in **Hong Kong** have been learning to organize their activities and Holy Day celebrations at the local level and increase their capacity to speak about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation. One friend shared some of their experiences:

In preparation for the first of the two bicentenaries, we felt that we could benefit from the other Holy Days to learn about creative ways to celebrate at the local level. For this year's Naw-Rúz celebration, we decided to hold diverse gatherings in communities across the region with up to 50 people attending each one, including the families of participants of the children's classes and junior youth groups. Convening these local gatherings led to the participation of many more friends in celebrating Naw-Rúz—some 35% more than last year—who engaged in uplifting conversations about the Bahá'í Faith.

We have become ever more conscious of the duty and privilege to share the Message of Bahá'u'lláh with others during this historic period leading up to the bicentenaries. Our aim is to seize every opportunity to engage in conversations about His Revelation. Each semester, students of the University of Hong Kong visit our Bahá'í community as part of their field trip assignments. In a recent visit, some youth from the community shared stories about the life of the Blessed Beauty, the concept of the Covenant, and some of their transformative experiences. This inspired many of the university students to get involved in the institute process.

In our recent reflection meetings in the **Hong Kong** and **Kowloon-New Territories** clusters, we divided into groups to consult on plans for the expansion phase. We set the goal to each share the Message of Bahá'u'lláh with 5 friends, totalling 100 meaningful conversations. Some of the friends immediately sent messages to others to participate in this collective endeavour. Another element of our community's efforts has been to raise more local tutors in Hong Kong. We are delighted to see that 11 youth set the goal of completing Book 7 before the Twin Holy Birthdays. As most of these youth are serving as junior youth animators or children's class teachers during the weekends, they meet once a week after work or school for their study. They are now halfway through Book 6 of the sequence of courses.

India

During a zonal reflection gathering for Bahá'í children's classes in the **Maharashtra and Goa** regions, the friends reflected on how their efforts to apply the guidance in the 18 May 2016 message to the celebration of the Twin Holy Days in 2016—by reaching the widest circle of people and inviting them to celebrations at the local level—has led to a flourishing of activity. Below are some insights and experiences shared by the friends gathered in this meeting, particularly in relation to the impact they felt this process has had on the children's classes.

Most of the people participating in the celebrations for the Twin Holy Days in 2016 were entire families engaged in children's classes in our villages and neighbourhoods.

In the **Malegaon** cluster, two celebrations were held. One of these was in the neighbourhood of Shiwajiwadi where, during the morning, families of the children and junior youth organized devotional gatherings in their homes across six lanes. The children's class teachers created a space in front of each home to have conversations about the activities of the Bahá'í community. During the day, the children, junior youth, teachers, animators, and members of the Local Spiritual Assembly visited homes and walked along every lane explaining to the residents of the entire neighbourhood the principles of the Bahá'í Faith and the significance of the Twin Holy Days. By that evening, 450 residents gathered for the celebrations.

Six celebrations were held in the **Nashik** cluster for the 2016 Twin Holy Days. Upon receiving an invitation to attend the celebrations, a school principal in the Devlali locality invited the Bahá'ís to address 2,500 children and 100 teachers. During that gathering, one children's class participant made a presentation on the lives of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb.

In the **Pune** cluster, creative arts activities were organized to involve the children in the celebrations. Through these activities, many parents and grandparents became aware of the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Teachings.

In the Katoli village of the **Jawali** cluster, the friends visited each home of the families of the children that participate in the children's classes. They gave flowers and sweets and spoke about devotional gatherings. Fifteen new devotional gatherings were initiated during the Twin Holy days. In the Shindewadi village of the same cluster, the children of one of the children's classes prepared art work for every home featuring the Báb's well-known prayer for the removal of difficulties.

Kyrgyzstan

After studying the 18 May 2016 letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, the friends in the **Tokmok** cluster were inspired to strengthen the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme as their contribution towards marking the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh. A youth of the cluster described their efforts as follows:

As we thought about the months leading up to the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, we felt that, as a first step, we needed to establish one more group with a junior youth that we had recently met. This would bring us to having at least 50 participants in the junior youth programme in a short time. With this as a foundation, we could have 100 junior youth participating in the programme by October. To make this plan a reality, we have started many conversations about

the community-building process with our friends in the universities and our neighbours in the dormitories, and invited those who were interested to join us to serve as animators and study the sequence of courses. As a group, we decided to each form 5 junior youth groups. We have been ardently supplicating the Blessed Beauty during dawn prayers to support our efforts to fulfil these goals.

Macau

In **Macau**, special efforts are being made to “spark the curiosity and wonder of many who may as yet be unfamiliar with the Names of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh” through cultural and artistic endeavours.² For the two weeks leading up to the Twin Holy Days in 2017, the friends will organize a Chinese calligraphy activity in each local Bahá’í centre and a calligraphy exhibition dedicated to the bicentenary anniversaries on the theme of the family. As part of the celebrations they will also hold a family festival. They are consulting about preparing songs and quotations, a special edition calendar, and painted cards with the Writings of the Blessed Beauty to share with friends in the community.

In the spirit of connecting as many hearts as possible with the Person, mission, and Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, the institutions have provided Bahá’í literature to be shared with relatives, neighbours, and other acquaintances with whom the friends are having conversations about the Twin Manifestations and the significance of the two-hundred-year anniversaries of Their Births. During the Nineteen Day Feast, the friends share about their efforts and plans in this regard.

Progress has also been made to have Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and other books about the Faith displayed in as many bookshops as possible. So far, 6 shops have agreed to display them. There are plans to approach more bookshops as well as libraries for this purpose in the coming months.

The community of Macau wishes to present as a gift to the Blessed Beauty the achievement of having 100 core activities; 100 participants in the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme; 200 contributors to the Fund; and during every cycle until the first of the bicentenary celebrations, conversations on spiritual themes with at least 200 individuals in 3 designated neighbourhoods.

Taiwan

After receiving the 18 May 2016 message written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, institutions and agencies in **Taiwan** attended a series of national meetings, and 13 Local Spiritual Assemblies consulted with members of the National Spiritual Assembly about how in all localities each individual could share the Message of Bahá’u’lláh with others. The account below describes how these consultations kindled a new spirit of teaching, leading to a series of teaching campaigns and a marked increase in the number of community-building activities and those participating in them.

The whole island of Taiwan is on the move, with the friends making various preparations for the upcoming Twin Holy Birthdays. In February 2017, a four-day teaching campaign was organized inviting youth and adults to participate in activities in an advanced cluster. Around 20 youth and 20 adults participated in this intense effort to carry out home visits and initiate conversations about the Teachings of the Faith and the educational programmes offered by the community. One new study circle was formed, and the youth in particular were set on fire. Two months later, in April, a second four-day campaign was launched, and this time 70 friends

participated, of which 50 were youth—including the 20 that participated in the February campaign. Each youth set a goal of either serving as a children's class teacher or an animator or participating in a study circle. Within two weeks, there were two new junior youth groups, one of which was formed in a school where two youth boldly shared about the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme and invited their schoolmates and teachers to participate. Fourteen youth and 3 teachers responded to their call.

A third four-day teaching campaign was planned for May—all 50 youth that took part in the April campaign signed up—and a month-long campaign is planned for the summer. For us, these developments have been the best start in preparing for the bicentenary celebrations later this year.

United Arab Emirates

In the **United Arab Emirates**, the friends are drawing on their experience of organizing the celebrations of the Twin Holy Birthdays in 2016 to prepare for the forthcoming bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh. One of the friends serving on an institution shared the following account of how the communities prepared for the celebrations in 2016.

After studying guidance from the Universal House of Justice, the National Spiritual Assembly wrote an inspiring letter urging the believers in every cluster in the country to take the opportunity of the celebrations of the Twin Holy Days in 2016 to learn as much as we can so that by 2017 we can have a befitting celebration of the first of the bicentenaries. Subsequently, the National Assembly asked the friends to share their experience of the celebrations in 2016, namely, to describe the conversations they had, how they invited people, how the communities prepared, what challenges they faced, and what they learned and could apply to celebrating the Twin Holy Days in 2017.

In **Dubai**, 29 celebrations were held for the Twin Holy Days in 2016. Around 800 people attended, of which 416 were friends of the Faith. The celebrations lasted for an entire week and took place every morning and evening. Both big and small gatherings were held in the neighbourhoods. In the past, the community had always held centralized Holy Day observances, but this time the Local Spiritual Assembly wrote to all of the Nineteen Day Feasts in the cluster encouraging the believers to celebrate the occasion in neighbourhoods. The Local Assembly urged the friends to reach everyone in the community and find creative ways to celebrate the Twin Holy Days. After this letter was read, everyone consulted on how they were going to make this happen. All wanted to be involved in some way, so the Assembly supported the people in the neighbourhoods in their efforts. The friends prepared different forms of invitations—some looked like wedding cards, others were shared through WhatsApp or Instagram, and some were handwritten on cards. They bought lots of flower pots and visited the homes of every parent whose child and junior youth were participating in a children's class and a junior youth group. They also visited anyone that had previously attended a core activity. The friends shared with one another banners and decorations they had prepared in anticipation of the Twin Holy Days. Gifts inscribed with quotations from Bahá'u'lláh were presented to those they were inviting.

The communities also reflected on how they would show to everyone they met the significance of the Persons and missions of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. At one of the celebrations, as people entered, they saw a big basket of roses with a sign: "Did you

know that Bahá'u'lláh loved roses? Please take one as you come in". All around the room easels were placed with interesting facts about the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

One mother dressed her young son in a suit before he went to school, and when he arrived, people asked: "Oh! Is it his birthday?" The mother answered: "No, but it is a very special time!" She then explained about the upcoming celebrations of the Births of the Twin Manifestations.

The junior youth groups and children's classes prepared weeks in advance for the celebrations. In two of our neighbourhoods, the friends of the Faith initiated, prepared, and hosted the celebrations. In one of them, participants of two study circles came together and invited a group of mothers to the celebration. During the gathering, they talked about the Bahá'í Faith and the life of Bahá'u'lláh, using audiovisual material and content from Book 6. They ate together, enjoyed music together, and all rejoiced in the knowledge that the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh had come close to 200 years ago.

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AUSTRALASIA

Australia

The National Spiritual Assembly of Australia recently sent a newsletter to its community highlighting the salient points shared at the National Convention about the forthcoming bicentenary celebrations. In addition to the newsletter, the National Assembly is inviting representatives from each Local Spiritual Assembly and Regional Bahá'í Council along with the Auxiliary Board members and the secretaries of the Area Teaching Committees in each region or group of clusters to participate in a webinar to reflect on how each community and Local Assembly is preparing for the Twin Anniversaries and how they are ensuring that there are follow-up efforts after the bicentenary as a natural part of the process of growth.

In particular, the **Sydney** cluster has an extraordinary goal of having 250,000 people join the bicentenary celebrations of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh. The Regional Bahá'í Council for **South-Eastern Australia** shared in the April issue of its newsletter some of the developments under way in preparation for the bicentenaries. Here is an excerpt from that issue:

It is hoped that the celebrations will span across a week period, and friends will have the opportunity to invite their friends, neighbours, colleagues, and associates to events at the local level.... Friends in Sydney have been preparing for this through the work of teams focused on 18 different geographical locations.

Initiatives to bring more people to the House of Worship in Sydney have also begun, with a team stationed on the grounds of the Temple on Sundays to meet and converse with visitors, and to learn about how this edifice can be used as a teaching tool for the cluster, especially by connecting visitors with community-building activities in their localities. The number of prayer services on Sunday has increased to 4 throughout the day, with gatherings held at the information centre between each session. The friends can use this as an opportunity to teach visitors about the Faith, and to involve them in the process of inviting their friends to the House of Worship and upcoming celebrations for the bicentenary.

Among the friends in Sydney who have been considering what gift they would like to offer to Bahá'u'lláh on the historic occasion of the bicentenary of His Birth are a handful of young professionals who were moved after studying in their community the message dated 18 May 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to think about how they, as a group, can honour the Twin Manifestations. One of the friends gave an account of the nature of their reflections and plans leading up to Naw-Rúz:

Three of us met to consult on how to reach out to other Bahá'ís working in the city to engage the professional community in preparing for the bicentenaries. We identified over 40 friends to invite to reflect together. After three meetings, a core group of 10 was formed and together we made plans for the Fast. We decided to visit 20 to 30 of our Bahá'í friends to share the vision and invite them to join our learning process. We organized workplace devotional meetings during the Fast and a Naw-Rúz gathering to learn to prepare for the Twin Anniversaries. One of the bicentenary celebrations is going to be held at one of our offices. During the programme, we will honour the Twin Manifestations and Their lives and mission and the principle of the oneness of humankind and its application by the Bahá'í community. In addition, a Bahá'í couple, who run a technology company, will share how they infuse spirituality into the workplace.

Mariana Islands

One of the many steps taken on the island of **Guam** during the months leading up to the first of the bicentenary celebrations is a weekly gathering of friends, young and old, veteran and newly engaged, to study *The Dawn-Breakers*. Below is a description of how they envision this process.

The friends aim to complete their deepening by October 2017. Many of the participants have just completed Book 2 and Book 4, and their study will no doubt infuse into their lives, conversations, activities, and service the spirit of love, sacrifice, courage, and resolve of those early heroes and heroines of our blessed Cause. In the process, this has become an opportunity for the friends to reach out to the families of the youth participating in the activities to engage in conversations about this deepening class, mainly speaking about the lives of the Twin Luminaries and the history of the Faith.

New Zealand

The following account describes how the friends in **Auckland** gained experience in organizing celebrations with the entire community at the neighbourhood level.

At the Nineteen Day Feast of Qawl last year, the Feast letter from the Local Spiritual Assembly of Auckland was read, which described how each sector could start thinking about how it will prepare for the celebrations of the bicentenaries of the Births of the Twin Manifestations and how the upcoming Holy Days of Ayyám-i-Há, Naw-Rúz, and Ridván could be used as occasions to practise having such celebrations at the local level. After some discussion, we decided in the Papakura sector to celebrate Ayyám-i-Há in the Smith's Avenue neighbourhood, where we hold regular activities and are connected with several of the community leaders and parents. We saw this as a great opportunity to strengthen these relationships and become more involved in the life of the community. An organizing committee was formed, which began involving the friends in what would become a celebration in a neighbourhood supported by the whole community.

Children and junior youth helped distribute a beautiful flyer about the gathering of Ayyám-i-Há to their parents and other local residents. The gathering was viewed as an opportunity to celebrate community and neighbourhood friendships. A larger version of the flyer was placed in the window of the community centre where the celebration was to be held.

On the day of the Ayyám-i-Há celebration, some of us went early to the venue to decorate it. Soon, there were over 20 children and adults from the neighbourhood who had arrived early to help. Children and youth made a banner of a large piece of canvas which said “Unity in the Community”. When the celebration began, 60 to 70 people were present.

It was a day of joy and celebration, where relationships were strengthened and many new friendships were formed. Upon reflection, we felt that during future Holy Day celebrations we need to share more about the community-building process occurring in the neighbourhood and enhance our ability to speak about the Faith and its Central Figures with members of the wider community.

Papua New Guinea

In **Papua New Guinea**, conversations about the bicentenary celebrations are part of the ongoing reflections of all the institutions and agencies. A community member noted:

We have been reflecting as a community about our vision for the numerical growth that we would expect to see as a result of these celebrations and how we need to prepare for them. Our institutions are ensuring that every meeting includes consultations on preparations for the bicentenary celebrations.

Tonga

A Local Spiritual Assembly in the **Tongatapu** cluster is dedicating part of each of its meetings to the preparations for the upcoming Twin Holy Birthdays. The Assembly has provided materials to share at the Nineteen Day Feast so that the community can centre some of its consultations on planning for the anniversaries as well. Teaching teams are deeply engaged in this conversation. One friend shared:

Our vision and goals set for the bicentenary celebrations focus on reaching out to the widest possible cross section of society and involving as many as possible in conversations about Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb. We are strengthening our ties and relationships with prominent people in the community and are intensifying our efforts to share the Teachings of the Faith.

Our efforts to help the population gain an awareness of Bahá’u’lláh and His Cause can have an impact on the reputation of the Faith in the local community and in the nation as a whole.

The programme for the upcoming Twin Anniversaries in October will include prayers, selections from the Holy Writings, and the arts. Artistic presentations will focus on themes of spiritual import so as to encourage elevated conversations. Efforts are now being made to prepare songs, dramas, dances, and other works of art, so as to express the spiritual principles enshrined in Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation.

Vanuatu

In a remote part of the biggest island of **Vanuatu**, called Santo, teams of assistants to Auxiliary Board members have been formed to visit each Local Spiritual Assembly to consult with them on their preparations for the upcoming Twin Holy Birthdays. The preparations include planting gardens so that food will be available for these celebrations, which will last for days and likely involve hundreds of Bahá'ís and their friends. An Auxiliary Board member commented that preparing for the bicentenary celebration of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh is like preparing for a wedding—the spirit of joy motivates you to invite all and give special attention to creating beauty.

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EUROPE

Italy

Grosseto is a town in Tuscany, with less than 20 Bahá'ís. The believers made a mighty effort to invite neighbours, colleagues, and others to the celebration of the Twin Holy Days in 2016, but only 10 people attended. The friends resolved to have many more conversations, on a daily basis, about the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and the community-building activities. So, every two weeks, a core group of friends met to consult on how to engage in conversations with more and more people, make concrete plans, and set firm goals.

They invited some families to a gathering that involved viewing and consulting about portions of the film *Frontiers of Learning* and studying quotations from Book 2 on themes such as the importance of education, the role of families in building a better society, the need for a Universal Educator for humanity, and the role of the Word of God. The parents and youth were invited to study Book 1, while the children were welcomed to join a children's class. Nineteen people expressed interest to know more about the Faith. One of the friends commented:

For six weeks we used every occasion offered in the course of our normal life to initiate conversations with people about what could be done to build communities based on the spiritual principles revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. We began inviting those we met to a weekly gathering, and when we held celebrations for Ayyám-i-Há, 20 new people attended.

What we have noticed is that engaging people we meet in a conversation about quotations from Book 1 is a good way to familiarize them directly with the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Within one or two conversations, people are eager to learn more, to see the beauty in creating unity in their own community, and to enter the institute process and also invite their friends to join. Beyond the 19 friends who are now regularly participating in the community-building process, some 50 new friends are involved in ongoing meaningful conversations in light of the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, 25 of whom have participated in at least one Holy Day celebration.

Finally, our own attitude has started to change. We have become more courageous and are willing to do more to prepare for the bicentenaries—using every Holy Day observance to measure our capacity for growth.

Luxembourg

In a village in **Luxembourg**, some 85 people representing 13 different nationalities gathered to celebrate Naw-Rúz. The local friends involved in the organization of this event drew inspiration from the worldwide efforts to prepare for the bicentenaries of the Births of the Twin Manifestations and visited friends and families who are involved in the core activities. They considered the Naw-Rúz gathering as an opportunity to strengthen bonds of friendship and unity around the common goal of translating the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh into action. In this way, 42 friends of the Faith attended the celebration. The unity and joy felt during the gathering brought momentum to the efforts of the community. The friends were inspired to think about how to widen the circle of those they can invite to the forthcoming bicentenary celebrations. To this end, they wrote lists of names of neighbours, colleagues, and other friends they could invite during a reflection meeting that took place after the Naw-Rúz celebration.

Poland

In **Poland**, the institutions decided to dedicate the programme of this year's summer school to honouring Bahá'u'lláh and preparing the community for the two-hundred-year anniversary of His Birth:

The main purpose of this summer school will be for us as a community to build and strengthen our capacities for service and to gain a deeper appreciation of the divine Teachings brought by Bahá'u'lláh. If 50 friends attend the summer school and each one of them, in the months leading up to the first bicentenary celebration, speaks with at least 20 of their friends about the life of Bahá'u'lláh and shares some prayers, one thousand souls will be apprised of His Revelation! It would be possible to imagine that each person could have, as a result of such efforts, ongoing conversations with at least 9 people whom they could invite to the celebrations in October and to other activities of the community.

The friends residing in a village in the **Krakow** cluster decided to visit all its 900 inhabitants before the bicentenaries—around 200 to 300 homes—and present them with a beautiful invitation and booklet that includes selections from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

Spain

Reflecting on the vision laid out by the Universal House of Justice in the 18 May 2016 letter written on its behalf—to impress upon all the communities “the significance of the coming Festivals” and encourage preparations to begin—the National Spiritual Assembly of **Spain** wrote to all Local Spiritual Assemblies urging each one to earnestly press on in light of this guidance. The National Assembly asked each local community to define concrete goals and outline creative actions that will honour the lives of the Twin Manifestations. Making reference to the historical period that the Bahá'í world has entered, the National Assembly recalled the brave and dedicated souls who arose during the Ten Year Crusade.

The process of reflecting, planning, and acting in preparation of the bicentenaries has inspired the community with a common vision and sense of collective endeavour. One line of action that emerged from consultations among friends serving the training institute was to hold a joint institute campaign—involving the 10 clusters in the country that had between 10 to 20 core activities—with the aim to have at least 50 people complete Book 1 in each cluster by the Twin Holy Birthdays in 2017.

Sweden

The friends in the combined neighbourhood area of Husby, Kista, and Akalla in **Stockholm** are preparing for the bicentenary anniversary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh by each week reaching out to as many neighbours as they can. With high resolve, they seized the opportunity to celebrate Naw-Rúz locally and had unprecedented participation from among their neighbours. One friend described their experiences as follows:

The preparation for the Naw-Rúz festival was an opportunity to practise for the upcoming bicentenary anniversaries. Even the Nineteen Day Feast provided a space to regularly consult and plan. Our animators, teachers, and tutors have made the greatest effort to have the necessary conversations to involve all of their participants, including parents and siblings, in the festival. About 400 invitation cards were printed and given out to the local population. This gave rise to meaningful conversations held with the neighbours, different organizations from the neighbourhood, and representatives of local authorities. About 110 friends attended the gathering, with a large percentage being friends of the Faith: parents, siblings of the children, junior youth, and youth. A member of the Swedish parliament, who has been supportive of the endeavours of the Bahá'ís and resides in the area, was present and greeted all who attended. The atmosphere was joyous, and for all it was a beautiful sight to see a large percentage of the residents of the neighbourhood, coming from diverse backgrounds, conversing and celebrating together.

Another key element of preparing for the bicentenaries has been the formation of a local teaching team in Husby with the specific aim of systematically having conversations that can lead to a shared understanding of matters of spiritual import with all neighbours, acquaint each directly with the Person of Bahá'u'lláh, and involve more souls in the institute process. The team aims to reach every household and every street of Husby. They have committed to spending four days of the week to this endeavour. Previously, such efforts were made mainly during the expansion phase, but the friends want to understand what it means to have continuous conversations all throughout the cycle and then add intensity during the expansion phase.

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¹ Message dated 18 May 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies.

² Message dated 18 May 2016.